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ABSTRACT

Although considerable research has examined various issues regarding gerontological curriculum, little attention has been focused on the experience of students of gerontology and aging. The "Foundations in Gerontological Education" study was extended to students by comparing views of students (N=132) on essential components of core curriculum with Foundations panelists (N=87). Student members of the Western Gerontological Society were surveyed using an instrument that randomly ordered the 40 topics agreed "essential" by 50% or more Foundation panelists. Information on essentiality, availability, and requirement of each topic, and data on related educational opportunities were collected. The findings indicated that students and panelists were in consensus on essentiality of certain topics: psychology of aging, health and aging, sensory change, sociology of aging, mental health and illness, economics of aging, and role change. These "essential" topics, however, were not universally available, and were required by half or fewer students' programs. A cluster of topics related to social policy, legislation, and social services was considered more essential by students than by panelists. Students' perceptions of topic essentiality was not related to discipline/major or to prior work history in gerontology. The results suggest that students' perceptions appear to be related significantly to requirements of individuals' programs and to academic levels of students. (Author)

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FOUNDATIONS IN GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION : ISSUES AND DILEMMAS FOR STUDENTS

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This study was conducted with the cooperation of the Education Committee of Western Gerontological Society and the Institute on Aging, University of Washington

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Introduction

One consequence of the rapid expansion of the field of gerontology has been increased availability of a variety of aging-related courses and gerontology programs in higher education. Considerable attention has been given by academicians and practitioners to various issues regarding both the substance of gerontological curriculum and the process of integrating aging content into established curricula of various disciplines and fields. At the same time very little attention has been focused on the experience of students presently enrolled in gerontology programs and/or preparing for careers in aging.

Purpose of the Study

This study was an attempt to explore issues in gerontological education from the vantage of students of gerontology. Specifically, the study examined four related areas: (1) students' views on importance of various substantive topic areas of gerontological curriculum; (2) the extent to which such topic areas are available, and are required, in the students' programs; (3) students' opinions on the importance of a number of extra-curricular educational opportunities relevant to gerontology; (4) and the extent to which such extra opportunities are available.

The investigation was a joint effort of the Education Committee of Western Gerontological Society and the Interdisciplinary Gerontological Training Project, Institute on Aging, University of Washington.

Method

The data were obtained via a survey mailed to the 635 student members of Western Gerontological Society. The survey instrument had two main sections.

The first section contained a list of 40 topic areas in gerontology which have recently been identified by leaders in the field as representing essential components of curriculum in gerontology. The curriculum list was based on findings from the Foundations in Gerontological Education Project, as reported in June of last year. (Gerontologist, 1980, 20(3, pt 2). The Foundations in Gerontological Education Project was designed and implemented by the Association of Gerontology in Higher Education and the Gerontological Society of America to examine current expert opinion about appropriate care curriculum for education in gerontology. Using the Delphi Method, data were obtained from a panel of 87 gerontologists recognized as leaders in research, practice or education. Findings strongly supported the idea that there is a core of essential knowledge that should be offerred to all persons preparing for work in the field of aging.

The 40 topics examined in the present study were those endorsed as "essential for all gerontologists" by at least 50% of the expert gerontologists surveyed in the Foundations project. (See Table 1.) In the questionnaire sent to the students in gerontology, three questions were asked with respect to each topic:

(1) How essential is the topic for all gerontologists? (to be answered on a 5 point scale).

(2) Is the topic available on your campus?

(3) Is the topic a requirement in your program?

The topics were randomly ordered to avoid any possible response bias.

The second section of the instrument listed 15 additional experiences and extra-curricular opportunities which have the potential of enhancing the students' education in gerontology. These included, for example, internships, access to professional gerontological organizations, faculty counseling regarding aging-related careers, and encouragement to publish in gerontological journals. (See Table 2). For each opportunity, students were asked:

(1) How essential is the opportunity or experience for all gerontologists?

(2) Is the opportunity/experience available in your present academic situation?

Respondent Characteristics

Twenty-one percent of the students (132) completed and returned the questionnaire. Table 3 presents a summary of personal and academic characteristics of the respondents. Their ages ranged from 20 to 65, with a mean of 32.6 years; 82% were women. Ninety percent were Caucasian, sixty-five percent had at least one year's work experience in the field of aging prior to entering their present academic program. Three-fifths were enrolled in masters-level programs, and one-fifth each in bachelor and doctoral-level programs.

Using academic major to define career area in accordance with criteria set forth in the Foundations Project report, 16% of the students fell within the biomedical area, 54% in the psychosocial area, and 27% in the socio-economic career areas. (Biomedical referred to health and biologically-oriented fields, e.g., nursing, medicine, nutrition; psycho-social referred to disciplines related to direct practice of human service, e.g., social work, counseling; socio-economic referred to disciplines concerned with

socio-economic and cultural issues in the larger society and their effects in older persons, e.g. public policy, economics).

Findings

1. Perceived Importance of Topics in Gerontology

Figure A compares the views of students with opinions of leaders in gerontology regarding the importance of various curriculum topics in gerontology. Because the Foundation's study limited panelists to a dichotomous response (Yes or No), the students' responses in this analysis were recoded as either affirmative (5 or 4 on a 5 point rating scale) or negative (3, 2 or 1).

The columns in Figure A cluster topics on the basis of percentage endorsement by the panel of gerontologists, and the rows cluster topics on the basis of percentage endorsement by the students. It is apparent from Figure A that roughly comparable proportions of both groups agree on the relative importance of over half the topics. (See topics enclosed in heavy lines.) For example, over 80% of both groups agree that all persons working in the field of aging should be knowledgeable concerning seven topics -- psychology of aging, health and aging, sensory change, sociology of aging, mental health and illness, economics of aging, and role change.

There were certain topics which students were more likely than gerontologists to endorse as essential knowledge for persons working in the field of aging. Four topics -- legislation concerning the aged -- the social-psychology of aging, government agencies, and community resources -- were endorsed by over 80% of the students but less than 60% of gerontologists. Other topics perceived as essential more frequently by students than gerontologists included: health care and services, behavioral changes, social

services and programs, attitudes toward aging and the aged, public policy for the aged, and cognitive changes.

The analysis of variance procedure was used to examine the possible relationship between the student's academic level (bachelor, master, doctoral), career area (biomedical, psycho-social, socio-economic), or previous work experience (1 year, 1-3.9 years, 4 or more years) and opinion regarding essentiality of the topic areas. For the seven topics endorsed by over 80% of both groups, student ratings were not influenced by either academic level or career area. However, students with extensive work experience rated one topic -- mental health and illness -- as significantly less essential.

Among the ten topics endorsed by over 80% of students but less than 80% of the gerontologists, academic level significantly influenced essentiality ratings for six topics -- legislation, community resources, government agencies, health care, social programs, and public policy -- with the general pattern that doctoral level students were significantly less likely to consider these topics as essential. A plausible explanation is that doctoral-level students share the tendency of expert gerontologists to view topics with an applied orientation as less essential, whereas bachelor and master-level students expecting to be involved in direct service endorse applied topics as being highly desirable. One topic, public policy, was influenced by career cluster. No topic rating was significantly influenced by previous work history.

2. Availability and Requirement of Curriculum Topics

Students were asked whether each topic was available, and whether it was a requirement in their particular program. As indicated on Table 4 the topics perceived "essential" by students and by Foundation panelists were fairly widely available. The notable exception is Economics of Aging, which was

available to fewer than half the students. While seven topics were perceived as "essential" by both gerontologists and students, fewer than half of the students indicated that any such contents were required in their program.

The lower half of Table 4 shows topics believed "essential" by a higher proportion of students than panelists. These topics were also generally available, although not to the degree of the list above. Here also, the topics were reportedly not required in the majority of students' programs.

It was hypothesized that students' perceptions of the "essential" nature of various curriculum content areas might be related to the particular availability or requirement of a topic. As seen in Table 4 there is a consistent relationship between students' perceiving various topics as "essential" and having those topics required in their programs. Simply having the course content available, but not required, did not relate to students viewing the topic as essential. Although these relationships do not imply causality, it can be speculated that students' perceptions of essential knowledge in gerontology were molded, at least to an extent, by required exposure to the topic area.

3. Perceived Importance of Extra Educational Opportunities in Gerontology.

Students were presented with a list of 15 extra curricular opportunities and experiences relevant to gerontology and asked to rate the essentiality of each in a 5-point scale. Table 5 indicates that the students considered faculty counseling in various areas to be the most important of the possible extra opportunities available to them. Aging related field placements in direct services and/or at the organizational level, publishing in professional journals, and attendance at professional meetings, were also opportunities

considered essential by a large proportion of students.

The possibility that degree level or career area might relate to perceived "essentiality" of the various educational opportunities was examined through the analysis of variance procedure and Scheffe's test for group differences. In general there were few significant differences across either degree levels or career majors regarding the relative importance of the various opportunities. Particularly striking was the agreement among students regardless of degree level or career major that availability of faculty counseling dealing both with academic work and career plans was the most essential opportunity for future

The exceptions to the general consensi were that students at the Ph.D. level were less likely to consider three opportunities essential -- membership in campus student gerontological organizations, field practicum in direct services, and field practicum at the organizational level. Baccalaureate students were most likely to perceive these as essential.

4. Availability of Extra-Curricular Opportunities and Experiences

The extent to which opportunities viewed as essential were actually available to students varied. Between twenty and thirty percent of students reportedly did not have faculty counseling in one or another key area available to them. The greater proportions of students indicating they had opportunity for student memberships in professional gerontological organizations and/or they had opportunities to attend professional gerontological meetings was likely a function of sampling: respondents all were student members of Western Gerontological Society.

The possibility that a student's perception of a particular opportunity being available to her/him depended upon either degree level or career major

was examined using Chi Square. There were no differences associated with career majors. However, degree level appeared to affect opportunities available to students. Baccalaureate level students were less likely to have three experiences available to them: presenting papers at gerontological meetings; publishing gerontological content in non-aging journals; and primary responsibility for aging-related research. As might be expected, Ph.D. students were most likely of the three levels to have these opportunities available. Interestingly, Ph.D. students were least likely of the three academic levels to have the availability of faculty counseling regarding either academic work or future career plans.

The association between students considering an opportunity as essential and reportedly having that opportunity available to them was examined through computing non-parametric correlations. For eight of the fifteen opportunities and experiences, a significant positive correlation was observed. One interpretation of these relationships is that students tend to choose educational situations which provided opportunities they believed important. On the other hand, exposure to various opportunities may have affected students' perceptions of their relative importance, as for example, opportunity to publish in gerontological journals or gerontological meetings.

Summary

In summary, data from the student survey revealed several things. Student viewpoint on which topic areas in gerontology are essential was found related to student academic level. The higher the academic level, the less likely a student was to consider topics of an applied nature essential. Student perceptions of topic essentiality was also related to whether the topic was required in their academic program. Topics which were required were more

likely to be viewed as essential. Students' perceptions regarding topics did not appear to relate to either their career major or their prior work experience in the field of aging.

While there is agreement between students and gerontologists regarding topics believed to be essential for all persons in the field of aging, none of these topics is universally available to students. Moreover, these "essential" curriculum components are requirements for fewer than half of the students presently enrolled in gerontology programs or disciplines with gerontology content.

Regarding extra opportunities in the field of aging, the most consistent finding was the agreement across degree level and career major regarding the importance of counseling from faculty on both academic work and career plans. While students at the Ph.D. level were just as likely to perceive faculty counseling as essential, they were significantly less likely to have it available, compared with other students.

40 TOPICS IN GERONTOLOGY

Sociology of aging

Intergenerational relationships

Social services & programs (array)

Exercise physiology (physical functioning e.g., physical fitness, disabilities)

Dependence/independence

Socio-cultural context of aging

Health care & services

Stress or loss, response to it

Nutrition and aging

Pathology, disease processes

Role change, developmental tasks e.g., family & sex roles; retirement; widowhood

Social-psychology of aging

Environment and aging

Institutionalization, its effects

Legislation concerning aged, e.g., Medicare, retirement law, SSI

Mental health & illness e.g., depression, senility

Biology of aging (normal)

Diseases of old age

Public policy for aged

Economics of aging

Chronic and/or multiple conditions

Psychology of aging (normal)

Interpersonal relationships

Personality development

Marital & family relationships

Adaptive mechanism

Health and aging

Community (local) resources

Government agencies e.g. AoA, State & Area Agencies, NIA

Physiology of aging, e.g., organ and systemic changes

Demography of aging, e.g., age structure of society, trends

Pharmacology & aging

Adjustment to aging

Cognition, cognitive changes e.g., intelligency, healing, memory

Physical needs

Sensory change, e.g., hearing, vision, touch

Lifestyle & health

Life-span developmental approach

Attitudes toward aging and aged, stereotypes

Behavior, behavioral changes

OPPORTUNITIES AND EXPERIENCES
IN GERONTOLOGY

Participation in campus student gerontological organization

Student membership in professional gerontological organization (e.g., Western Gerontological Society, Gerontological Society)

Attendance at professional gerontological meeting

Presentation at professional gerontological meeting

Publications related to gerontology in professional journals

Publications of other types related to gerontology

Primary responsibility for teaching course in gerontology

Any other teaching-related activities in gerontology (e.g, teaching assistant, guest lecturer, workshops)

Primary responsibility for conducting research in gerontology

Any other research-related activities in gerontology (e.g., research assistant, interviewer, data processer)

Internship or field placement - direct service to the elderly

Internship or field placement - organizational level (e.g., planning, coordination, administration)

Counseling by faculty/advisor in academic work in gerontology

Counseling by faculty/advisor in career goals in gerontology

Counseling by faculty/advisor on job placement in gerontology

CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENT RESPONDENTS (N = 132)*

PERSONAL

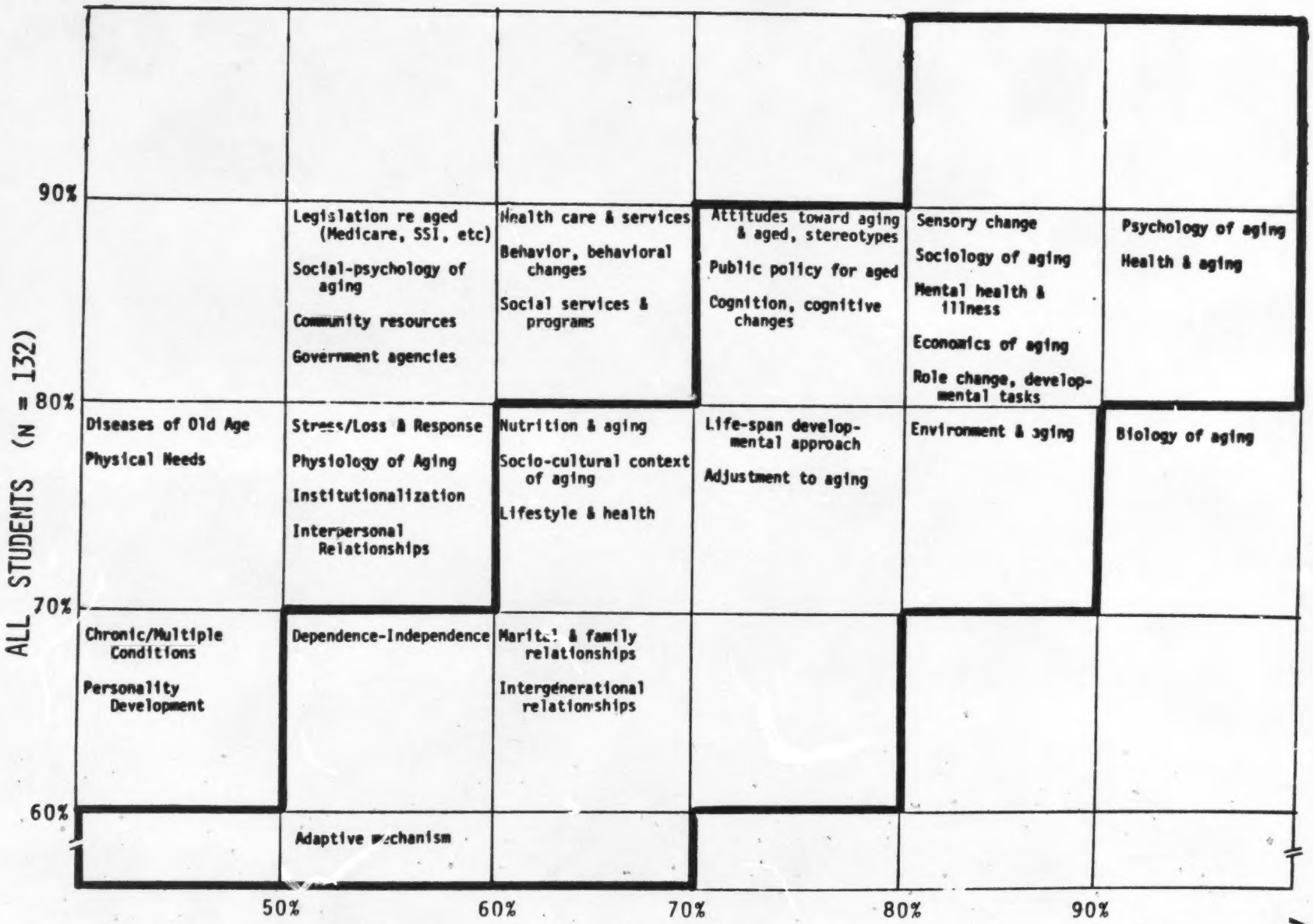
AGE:	UNDER 30	42%
	30 - 50	44%
	OVER 50	12%
GENDER:	MALE	18%
	FEMALE	82%
GEOGRAPHICAL AREA:	CALIFORNIA	52%
	UTAH	13%
	OREGON	9%
	WASHINGTON	8%
	ARIZONA	6%
	11 OTHERS	17%

ACADEMIC

ACADEMIC LEVEL:	BACHELOR	19%
	MASTER	60%
	DOCTORATE	19%
CAREER CLUSTER:	BIOMEDICAL	16%
	PSYCHOSOCIAL	54%
	SOCIOECONOMIC ENVIRONMENTAL	27%
PRIOR EXPERIENCE IN "AGING":		
	UNDER 1 YEAR	28%
	1 - 3.9 YEARS	36%
	4+ YEARS	30%
PREVIOUS ROLE IN "AGING"		
	PROFESSIONAL	30%
	PARAPROFESSIONAL	29%
	VOLUNTEER	15%

* The questionnaire was mailed to all 635 WGS student members in January 1981; 132 students completed and returned the survey, a 21% response rate.

PERCENTAGES ENDORSING TOPIC AS "ESSENTIAL" OR "VERY ESSENTIAL"



AVAILABILITY AND REQUIREMENTS OF TOPICS VIEWED AS "ESSENTIAL" BY STUDENTS AND ALSO VIEWED AS "ESSENTIAL" BY OVER 80% OF GERONTOLOGISTS

	ESSENTIAL Gerontologists %	ESSENTIAL Students %	AVAILABLE Students %	REQUIRED Students %
Psychology of Aging	98	85	84	58**
Health and Aging	97	83	77	48**
Sensory Changes	89	81	74	48**
Economics of Aging	81	82	56**	26**
Sociology of Aging	86	82	83	48**
Mental Health & Illness	83	85	74	45**
Role Change, Developmental Tasks	84	85	74	44**

BUT VIEWED AS "ESSENTIAL" BY FEWER THAN 80% OF GERONTOLOGISTS

Cognition, Cognitive change	70	80	72**	45**
Attitudes toward Aging	75	80	76	53
Public Policy re Aging	71	82 [a,b]	60**	44**
Social Services & Programs	62	80 [a]	70*	43**
Health Care & Services	68	81 [a]	72	33**
Social-Psychology of Aging	53	86	77	44**
Legislation re Aged	52	86 [a]	61	36**
Community Resources	51	81 [a]	64**	41**
Government Agencies	51	81 [a]	59**	43**

[a] "essentiality" varies significantly by adacemic level

[b] "essentiality" varies significantly by career cluster

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ESSENTIALITY AND AVAILABILITY OF EXTRA-CURRICULAR OPPORTUNITIES AND EXPERIENCES IN GERONTOLOGY

	Essential (1 = low, 5 = high)	Available	
	$\bar{X}$	% yes	
INTERNSHIP..., DIRECT SERVICE	4.70[A]	86.1[B]	.08
FACULTY COUNSELING, ACADEMIC WORK	4.47	80.3[B]	.15
FACULTY COUNSELING, GERONTOLOGICAL CAREER	4.46	68.2[B]	.17*
FACULTY COUNSELING, JOBS IN AGING	4.41	59.1	.12
INTERNSHIP..., ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL	4.40[A]	72.0	.21*
GERONTOLOGY PUBLICATIONS, PROFESSIONAL	4.11	74.2	.28**
ATTENDANCE AT PROFESSIONAL GERONTOLOGY MEETINGS	4.05	84.1	.05
STUDENT MEMBERSHIP, PROFESSIONAL GERONTOLOGICAL ORGANIZATIONS	3.96	88.6	-.05
GERONTOLOGY PUBLICATIONS, NON PROFESSIONAL	3.92	71.2[B]	.20*
OTHER TEACHING-RELATED ACTIVITIES, GERONTOLOGY	3.66	61.4	.18*
PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY, GERONTOLOGY RESEARCH	3.58	58.3	.28**
OTHER RESEARCH-RELATED ACTIVITIES	3.50	59.1	.21*
PRESENTATIONS, PROFESSIONAL GERONTOLOGICAL MEETINGS	3.21	59.8[B]	.14
PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY, TEACHING GERONTOLOGY	3.17	24.2[B]	.21*
CAMPUS STUDENT GERONTOLOGICAL ORGANIZATION	3.14[A]	57.5	.12

RESULTS OF ANALYSES BASED ON ACADEMIC LEVEL (BACHELORS, MASTERS, DOCTORAL)

[A] ANALYSES OF VARIANCE SIGNIFICANT AT $P < .05$

[B] CHI-SQUARE ANALYSES SIGNIFICANT AT $P < .05$

* $P < .05$

** $P < .01$